

*UNITED NATIONS INTELLECTUAL HISTORY PROJECT*  
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*365 Fifth Avenue*  
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**TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW OF**  
**DAME MARY SMIETON**

**BY**

**RICHARD JOLLY**

**London, 6 January 2000**

*Note: The tape of Richard Jolly interviewing Dame Mary Smieton in London on 6 January 2000 was damaged and only part of the interview was recovered. The recovered portion follows.*

RICHARD JOLLY: Tell us about Julia Henderson. Was she employed by the UN at that point?

MARY SMIETON: Oh, yes. She started off in London with the preparatory commission. She was recruited by Eric Biddle, who did quite a lot of the early recruitment. And she went over and worked there on the budget and all the personnel directives and so on. And she was, in fact, employed in the budget office at the first stage, her first work before she got transferred over to the social affairs department, where, of course, she worked for years and was largely responsible for the lines on which it developed.

RJ: And she didn't work under David Owen, then?

MS: No, she was working on the administrative side during his time in the UN.

RJ: Let me ask you about the position of women in the UN at that stage. Were you conscious that you were taken as seriously as any other people, or was there some discrimination against you or Julia or others just on the grounds of your being women?

MS: I don't think so. I was never conscious of it.

RJ: One of the interesting issues to me is that during the Second World War, in the United States and in Britain, there were women in all the senior positions. But, after the Second World War, there was often pressure to put women back in the home. And women held noticeably fewer senior positions during the subsequent first two or three, and perhaps even four, post-Second World War decades. Did you see any of this operating in the UN?

MS: Not directly but it must have limited the number of competent women put forward as candidates for senior jobs. But of course there was still this theory that you had got to have a

women's section, and that must of course be headed by a woman. And I think there was a general sort of irritation at having a women's section. I have always been against women's sections. It takes a feeling of responsibility from the departments that have to set overall policy. A women's section is a distraction, in my view. So I think whoever was in charge of the women's department was rather regarded as the "statutory woman," as we used to call it in this country. I think that is the way it showed itself there. But for a competent member of staff, I didn't notice any particular feelings of that kind. I'm trying to think if there was any nationality, in particular, that showed up in that respect. I don't think so.

RJ: And in terms of employment, you were concerned to ensure reasonable national balance. Was there any effort to ensure reasonable gender balance?

MS: I was too busy. I don't know if this is of any interest to you, but one of the things where we fell down very badly, in my opinion, and I don't think I could have done anything about it, was that all the specialized agencies were busy getting going. The ILO (International Labour Organization), of course, was fully established at that time. But, we were just unable, or at least I was unable, to attempt really to bring the responsible people together to try and get a common set of procedures and staff and levels of salaries and so on. I just couldn't do it. And it was a great pity because then it painfully had to be readjusted in the years after. The only thing we did manage to do was to get a common pension fund. That we did do from the start.

RJ: But not a common salary scale.

MS: No.

RJ: Very interesting.

MS: That was a great pity. We did have one or two meetings, but I just couldn't. I hadn't the time or energy or the capacity to do it. Though I didn't realize what a serious lack that was. But it was.

RJ: Of course, much later, I mean the 1980s, and even in some respects the 1990s, there have been further efforts to get common procedures at a more detailed level. We have been working on common salaries for a long while. But common procedures, for example between UNICEF (UN Children's Fund) and UNDP (UN Development Programme) in the treatment of national staff, has been a very important issue. And we in UNICEF held very strong opinions that in emergencies or even famine situations the national salary scale principles meant that national staff members often just received too little. In situations of rapid inflation, for example, the cumbersome, slow, UN procedures which UNDP was following meant that it would be two or three years before a family would get adequate compensation for inflation which was rising at sometimes 2,000 or 3,000 percent per month. For UNICEF, this was unacceptable, and we developed all sorts of ad hoc procedures to ensure reasonable compensation, sometimes providing food baskets. But, strictly, they were not accepted by the UN as a whole. But we argued that we just had to go ahead.

MS: That didn't arise during my time. But I can well see that. Of course, there were some awful complications over things like home leave.

RJ: What were some of the complications that hit you?

MS: Take two staff members married from different countries. Whose home would they go to? Of course, they wanted a double allowance so that they could both go to their homes together. There were considerable complications of that kind.

RJ: Were there many marriages of staff members at that time?

MS: There were some. One of my own staff was married to a woman in the Bureau of Personnel, or wasn't married but was living with her, I think. He was an executive officer in our department, and the wife was being responsible for personnel policy in our department. Somebody came along and said, "Isn't this a bit odd?" And I said, "What's odd?" I just didn't know these things.

There were a number of these things. But, no, I don't remember a great deal of actual marriage. But some of them just were married to people of different nationalities. It made it very complicated. But all of these sorts of procedures ought to have been worked out right across the board. They weren't and it was very unfortunate. But I was thankful the pension scheme got going, because it was so much more efficient to have a large membership. I had never taken a chair at a meeting of international actuaries before.

RJ: When you think back to the American public support for the UN at the time, were you struck at this enthusiasm that led so many people to apply for jobs?

MS: Oh, yes, there was great enthusiasm. A lot of people said at the beginning it was quite wrong to put the UN in New York, but I was sure that was a wrong judgment because if it had been in Europe nobody would have paid any attention.

RJ: What about Eleanor Roosevelt? Did you ever see her?

MS: Oh yes, I did. She was a very impressive person. I remember a lunch with Eleanor Roosevelt and Mrs. Pandit and somebody else. I can't remember who that was. But oh yes, Eleanor Roosevelt was a most impressive person.

RJ: Can you tell us a bit what you remember?

MS: I can't, unfortunately, remember very much about the lunch and what happened. She just gave a sense of assurance, of great common sense. Things were coped with and handled

and managed. And she was doing it. She just was a very dignified and very efficient person. A very pleasant one.

RJ: She was working during this period, chairing the committee that produced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

MS: Yes. It hadn't got very far when I was there. That was, of course, her great achievement. Who was [Jawaharlal] Nehru's sister? Mrs. Pandit?

RJ: Yes, Pandit.

MS: Yes, she was a very attractive person.

RJ: I did meet her briefly.

MS: Somebody once said, "If Mrs. Pandit doesn't want to negotiate, you can't negotiate with Mrs. Pandit." She was a very, very clever person and a charming one. And all the drivers simply loved her. She was a wonderful figure. But I don't know how effective she was in actually putting through policy. I can't really say.

RJ: She was chief Indian delegate?

MS: Yes, she was.

RJ: Did you meet many of these people at cocktail parties or other social events?

MS: Yes, because they didn't sit on my commission. That was an administrative commission, and you didn't get heads of delegations. So I didn't meet them there.

RJ: Are there any other figures or characters that you remember from the time?

MS: Oh, well, the Australian.

RJ: [Robert] Jacko Jackson?

MS: Jacko, yes.

RJ: Tell me about Jacko.

MS: His reign didn't last very long. He was much too disposed to take things into his own hands. I remember one meeting with him. It was at one of those meetings that we frequently used to have with assistant secretaries-general. And Jacko was throwing his weight around, cracking his hands on the tables. He was all worked up. The head of the administration was all worried because Jacko insisted on having his own special car rigged up with typewriters and typists and everything else. He couldn't waste a moment. All of this strife developed, and he didn't last very long. He didn't suit the atmosphere.

RJ: But he initially was on the administrative side.

MS: Yes, I'm not quite sure what his particular assignment was. But he was on the general staff, yes.

RJ: I knew him much later, when he was still heavily involved in emergency issues. What about Barbara Ward? Did you know Barbara Ward?

MS: No, I didn't know her.

RJ: I think she hadn't taken up with Jacko, or Jacko hadn't taken up with her at that point. I should know, but I don't remember the dates. You didn't, by any chance, have anything to do with Michal Kalecki, the Polish economist, the very distinguished Polish economist?

MS: No, was he there then?

RJ: He probably joined later.

MS: John Humphrey I remember very well. He was a one-armed Canadian. I think he was in human rights. Yes, it was. Yes, human rights was his position. He was a really good chap.

RJ: Tell us how you came to be appointed to the UN, yourself. I don't know what you had been doing during the Second World War.

MS: I was in the Ministry of Labour, working on manpower problems. But I had a regular sort of straightforward civil service training in the Personnel Department and so on. I was dealing with employment questions in 1946. I had two years off during the war, when I had helped Lady Reading start up the Women's Voluntary Services for Air Raid Precautions. And that was quite interesting. Indeed, that's the only bit of experience that was directly related to what I had to do in the UN, i.e., starting up something from scratch. But then I had been put on manpower questions, the call-up question, under Ernest Bevin. I worked mainly on the employment side of the ministry's work.

Eric Biddle had been sent on a trawl around European countries to find suitable staff. There were these various jobs that had to be filled. I don't know how many came from Eric Biddle. Julia Henderson certainly did. He approached the Treasury in England. And the Treasury, in its turn, approached departments and said that there were these jobs going. Was anybody interested? I expressed interest. They weren't quite sure what job I was going to be offered. They thought it might be personnel. It was personnel. I got a telegram. And then I got a letter. I found my letter recently when I was looking through my papers.

RJ: But why did you apply, if I may ask? Did you have particular interest in internationalism or in the League of Nations or in the postwar vision?

MS: I had some experience of work with the ILO, because that was a Ministry of Labour responsibility. And I had been very much interested in that. But I think there was a general feeling that this was a worthwhile, extremely interesting thing to do. So I did. But, the arrangement then was that they wanted me to remain on the British national staff. They said, "Yes, you can go. You can go for two years. And if you go for two years, you can have your job back. But if you stay longer, no. You cannot have your job back." So I took my two years.

But later on, they became a little more forthcoming. But they would never say, “Yes, you can go. And we should regard the experience you have there as extremely valuable when you come back.” They would never say that. They said, “You can’t make any difficulty. You come back to where you were.” I thought that was stupid and mean.

RJ: But you also have a professional view of that, because that was not only stupid and mean, but administratively inefficient.

MS: Yes. I did think so. I still think so. I don’t know whether they’ve changed. They may have.

RJ: In a curious way, it seems to me now a somewhat American attitude, that the UN is not serious. Work within our own government is serious, but work within the UN shouldn’t count.

MS: Well, I can imagine that stems from the general U.S. present attitude to the organization.

RJ: Yes. But I am surprised that the British government, even at that time, adopted such a self-centered approach.

MS: Yes. I thought it was shocking.

RJ: Did you ever try and challenge it as a matter of principle?

MS: Yes, I did. I don’t know whether it was a matter of principle. But I talked to the head of the civil service. We had two meetings about it. But I don’t think I mounted a very serious challenge. I don’t know if they altered it. They may have. I don’t know. But I did think it was administratively foolish as well as being narrow-minded. But that’s how I got there. They asked me please to come by air, but I refused to do that because I thought I would rather take a

little time reading all the massive documentation the Preparatory Commission produced. So I went over on one of the queen's vessels.

RJ: Tell me just a little bit what you were doing with the ILO in the 1930s.

MS: I didn't do much in the 1930s. It was probably just after the war that I got mostly involved because of the tripartite nature of it, with the employers, the unions, and the governments. I found that a very fascinating way of working things out. And on the whole it did work very well. There was one chap in the ministry, Sir Guildhaume Myrddin Evans, who was very influential on the governing body of that organization. And I used to go along with him sometimes. I was always surprised that it did work so well. It was a very well-run organization, the ILO. The exact topics escape me that we were discussing at that time.

RJ: Was your impression that the tripartite structure, in some way, worked better internationally than employer union negotiations in Britain?

MS: Yes, I think it did.

RJ: That's a very interesting comment. Did you have any idea why it was in advance of British attitudes and experience?

MS: The things that they were having to debate were rather wide issues and not very detailed, because they had got to apply internationally. So the unions, in particular, I suppose weren't up against their members quite so closely with things to do that would really affect their positions as leaders of their particular unions. I suppose that was probably why.

RJ: Yes, in some sense it was an easier set of issues than the nitty-gritty of actual negotiation. Of course, to me as an economist one of the interesting features of the post-Second World War was the adoption of Keynesian policies: in the United States, the Full Employment Act; in Britain, the Beveridge Plan and full employment policies. And there was, in 1949, a

major UN report on policies to achieve full employment globally, which Nicholas Kaldor and others had a hand in putting together.

MS: I remember the British white paper. It was 1948, wasn't it? "Full Employment Policy," I think it was.

RJ: Your memory is probably better than mine on that. Yes. But tell me what you remember about it.

MS: Oh, that was really very exciting. Because, you see, all the previous dealings over unemployment, apart from J.H. Thomas being given a specific job but without any real power, had been left to the Ministry of Labour. That was ludicrous. This was the first really clear statement by government that it was the economy, and that people who were really running the economy and the treasury and all that which had a major responsibility for full employment, and not just to say that this was a matter of labor. And this was a true changeover.

RJ: You were involved in drafting the white paper?

MS: Yes. And it was very interesting because the paper itself didn't say what was full employment. But when we came to the end of a parliamentary session the government slipped out, in answer to a written question, that what they were talking about was 4 percent.

RJ: Four, not 3 percent?

MS: Yes, I'm quite sure that I'm right.

RJ: Because Beveridge said 3 percent. He said that 3 percent unemployment should be the goal and added that the country would be very lucky to approach that figure, but that it should be the goal. So the government actually said 4. And of course it actually achieved much, much less than 4. Eventually unemployment was 1 or 2 percent for many of the early post-Second World War years.

MS: It was more, but at that point I left.

RJ: What was your role in drafting the white paper?

MS: I was representing the employment side of it. It was just an input from in the Ministry of Labour the way it was stated.

RJ: Who were the dominant figures on the treasury side? Do you remember?

MS: Hugh Gaitskill was involved in this but I may be wrong, but he was a member of the staff of the Board of Trade at one point.

RJ: Yes.

MS: And I rather think he was involved in this. I may be wrong. I think so. I don't remember. It was a long time ago.

RJ: Did Alec Cairncross have a role?

MS: I should have thought that he would have had, later. He died just the other day.

RJ: Yes. He did. We are going to need to end in a moment. But let me just, if I may—when you were given your great honor and made Dame Mary, what was cited as the reasons for that?

MS: I don't remember; it was a fairly normal occurrence when you reached a certain rank. But there was a strong feeling that you did not get national honors from being an international civil servant.

RJ: Yes.

MS: So, I presume, I got to the grade when you do normally become a dame. In those days you did. So I don't think they would have stressed my international work.

RJ: What grade was this?

MS: Under-secretary.

RJ: May I ask when you became under-secretary?

MS: 1946, I think it was. In, 1948 I was made a dame. I was assistant-secretary when I went to the UN.

RJ: And you came back and became under-secretary for labour, in the Ministry of Labor.

MS: Not quite at once.

RJ: So when you came back you were in the civil service in Britain for another ten years, were you, or something like that?

MS: I came back in 1948. I retired in 1963.

RJ: Were you conscious, when you came back, of how international UN experience was contributing to your perspectives within the country?

MS: My international experience made me realize how one is pulled in different directions, because when I was there I felt European; I felt Commonwealth; I felt British. And the three things tugged. It was very interesting.

RJ: Tugged in different directions?

MS: To some extent, yes. I felt Anglo-Saxon. Oh, yes, it was very, very interesting.

RJ: It was rather stimulating. Positive.

MS: Oh, yes. It was one of the most exciting possible times. And at that time, of course, there were events in those years. A lot of work. A funny thing—I went round the office once. I forget why. But I saw all of these names on doors: director of this, director of that. I said, “Who are all these people?” They had all turned themselves into directors and had plaques put on their doors without any authority whatsoever. It was the most unbelievable thing and shows the sort of chaos that was prevalent at the beginning.

RJ: Well, thank you very much indeed.

MS: I don't know if I was much help doing your particular study.

RJ: Well, it's very interesting background. And thank you very much, Dame Mary.

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